

# **UCLA**

## **Publications**

### **Title**

Book review: Digitize This Book! The Politics of New Media, or Why We Need Open Access Now

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3f77t6td>

### **Journal**

Technology and Culture, 51(3)

### **ISSN**

1097-3729

### **Author**

Borgman, Christine L.

### **Publication Date**

2009-06-25

### **DOI**

10.1353/tech.2010.0030

June 25, 2009

To appear in *Technology and Culture* (University of Chicago Press). Review of

*Digitize This Book! The Politics of New Media, or Why We Need Open Access Now*. By Gary Hall. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Pp. vii+301. \$60/\$19.95.

By Christine L. Borgman, Professor and Presidential Chair in Information Studies, UCLA

Gary Hall's manifesto is provocative and timely, if not as timeless as Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*, to which Hall's title presumably refers. The book is an extended argument for open access, specifically for the OA model of depositing academic research and scholarship in online archives or repositories (he uses the latter two terms synonymously). OA arose first in the sciences, out of a need for speed and breadth of dissemination that was not being met by traditional publishing channels. Humanities publishing in general, and cultural studies in particular (the central focus of Hall's work and the repository he founded), have different concerns than the sciences. His argument that the academic gift economy is more central to the humanities than to the sciences is among the strengths of this book. He claims that "another university is possible," in which all scholarly products are available freely (i.e., free of cost to the reader) and are permanently accessible.

Hall's manifesto is a political argument, drawing heavily upon Derrida, for why the university should convert to a gift-exchange model of publishing and dissemination. His reliance on Derrida – a polarizing figure in academe – narrows the audience for the book. He also speaks to the converted by referring to a number of authors as signifiers of schools of thought, without explaining those schools of thought or providing specific bibliographic references for their work. The book itself might have made a better online publication, as the narrative is chopped up by intervening metadata chapters that comment on the text itself: Introduction; Metadata I; Section I (Chapter 2; Metadata II; Chapter 3); Section II (Chapter 4; Metadata III; Chapter 5); Conclusion; Metadata IV. It does not flow well as a monographic exposition.

Hall identifies many of the important arguments for open access such as ubiquitous access, breadth of audience, and integration of research and teaching. While he does not claim to address the economic or institutional frameworks for open access, these concerns are central to his argument for a new kind of university in which ideas float more freely. As someone who edits a journal and who manages a repository, he is surprisingly unreflective about the underlying infrastructure that supports these ventures. He blithely suggests that open access not only makes it possible to publish almost anything, no matter how obscure or esoteric, but to make research "permanently" available (Hall's emphasis, page 51). The computing and communications infrastructure of the university requires a substantial investment with considerable ongoing costs. Similarly, the editorial costs of selecting, reviewing, editing, and disseminating

publications are non-trivial, whether in digital or paper form. Someone has to construct and maintain those repositories, if they are to provide “permanent” access. Sustaining content requires curation, as content must be migrated continuously to new formats and technologies as they appear. Paper books can survive through benign neglect; digital records cannot. He sidesteps the issue of *who* will make scholarly works permanently accessible. The book index also lacks these terms that should be central to the argument: library, archive, institution, repository, curation, preservation, sustainability.

That “other possible university” must be invented, nurtured, and managed by scholars themselves – “them is us,” as my colleague Johanna Drucker has argued for the humanities [1]. Hall does not address directly the incentives – or the disincentives, which are manifold – for scholars to contribute their work to digital repositories. Institutional repositories have sought contributions for nearly a decade now, and the deposit rate continues to be dismally low, despite the obvious benefits articulated by Hall, Willinsky [2], and others. My own work addresses open access in the context of scholarly communication [3], a literature largely outside Hall’s purview in this book.

Hall’s motivation to address open access from the perspective of the humanities is laudatory, as the issues indeed are different from the sciences, and the goals and benefits need to be explained to the humanities community by those who are scholars, editors, and repository directors. The humanities have remained more bound to print than have other disciplines, and arguably have the most to gain from digital dissemination. In this book, Hall has argued, if in a rambling manner, *why* the university should move toward open access. Now he needs to address the question of *how* to do so, and how to motivate his fellow humanities scholars to lead the way.

1. Drucker, J. (2009). Blind Spots: Humanists must plan their digital future. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, **55**(30): B6. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i30/30b00601.htm> on 25 June 2009.
2. Willinsky, J. (2006). *The Access Principle: The Case for Open Access to Research and Scholarship*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
3. Borgman, C. L. (2007). *Scholarship in the Digital Age: Information, Infrastructure, and the Internet*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.